

Rabbi Feldman Yom Kippur Sermon, 5766

Before we read from the Torah scroll, whether on a holiday, Shabbat or during a weekday service, the congregation chants a line from the book of Deuteronomy. It is a sentence spoken by Moses to the Israelite people as he prepares to leave them and face his own death: “*v’atem hadvekim ba adonay eloheychem chayyim kulchem ha-yom.*” *And you, the ones who cling to Adonay, you are all alive here today.* Each time we gather in community to hear the words of Torah we take a moment to notice that simultaneously obvious and wondrous fact: We are alive to come together and to share in the wisdom of Torah.

Here we are now, today on this Yom Kippur. We have survived another year. Granted this profound gift, we fast, pray, reflect and repent -- so that we can remember – *lizkor*—to make good use of our lives.

Untaneh Tokef, a central prayer of the High Holy Days names our frailty, our mortality, and the painful uncertainty of living. It asks “who shall live and who shall die” between this year and the next? And then lists in detail the various ways we could meet our end. This same prayer, though, says that we can temper our fate, we can soften the harshness of the decree.

Untaneh Tokef is a pragmatic response to the overwhelming, ultimate truth of our own mortality. Faced with a sense of powerlessness in contemplating our own death, it gives us something to do in real time, here and now. Certainly, teshuvah and tzedakah may make intrinsic sense. Teshuvah, repentance, ensures us that regardless of our errors, if we recognize our wrong doings and take steps returning us to the right path, God will take us back. It teaches us that uttering “forgive me” from a place of self-knowing can open the pathways to reconciliation and reconnection between human souls. In the words of Rebbe Nachman: *If you believe you can destroy, believe you can fix.* Meaning, the potential to do something wrong is also the potential to correct that same mistake. A life of Teshuvah, then, keeps us whole, true to ourselves, our relationships, and to God. Teshuvah is a path to living life with integrity. It is one way we can shore ourselves against the harshness of the decree.

Similarly, the practice of tzedakah – righteous giving -- affirms the meaning of our lives. We can ease the burdens that others carry in this often harsh world. Through tzedakah we realize that we are part of a sacred web of connection. By reaching out to others, we participate in God’s love for humanity. Through tzedakah, then, we may ease the sorrow of life’s end for we will know that we have lived a life that has mattered, that has helped others.

What may be less clear, though, is the role of the third element in the Un’taneh Tokef’s prescription—the role of tefillah, prayer. Those of you attending all of the services from the evening of Rosh Hashanah up until this point will have logged in about 20 hours in prayer. Why invest all of this time, and why consider making Tefillah a routine part of one’s life like tzedakah and teshuvah? Do we really believe, as the ancients may have, that praying hard on Rosh Hashanah can alter the events of coming year or avert tragedy and loss? Is this how we believe the world works? Is the goal of prayer, as comedian Steven Wright suggests, nothing more than asking God: “...please break the laws of the physical universe for my convenience”?

I would venture that most of us do not believe that prayer and God work this way. We don’t hold to a God that will stop hurricanes, and earthquakes and other natural events because of our prayer. Perhaps when u’ntaneh tokef states that prayer can save us it is hinting at something else entirely. Briefly, I want to describe three ways Tefillah can enrich our lives, and in doing so, *ma’avir et ro’ah ha g’zeyrah*, help us to balance the harsh vulnerability of living.

To illustrate my first point, a story:

One day a rabbi, in a frenzy of religious passion, rushed in before the ark, fell to her knees, and started beating her breast, crying, “I’m nobody! I’m nobody!”

The cantor of the synagogue, impressed by this example of spiritual humility, joined the rabbi on her knees, saying, “I’m nobody! I’m nobody!”

The shamas (custodian), watching from the corner, couldn't restrain himself either. He joined the other two on his knees saying, "I'm nobody, I'm nobody"

At which point the rabbi, nudging the cantor with her elbow, pointed at the custodian and said, "Look who also thinks he's nobody."

We live in a culture that aggrandizes and consumerizes the self. Products and programs abound to help us become smarter, stronger, more competitive, younger looking, richer, more successful and productive. Through humor, this tale of the cantor, the rabbi and the shamas elucidates a counter culture message – the importance of true selflessness, the humility we wish to cultivate in prayer.

Prayer humbles us because it focuses our awareness, rising in gratitude, to the world outside of ourselves. When we stop for a moment before we eat to bless bread, bread ceases to be just caloric intake gobbled down to satisfy our appetite. The simple sandwich becomes an occasion to bless the miracle of earth and sky, of seed and human effort that all lead to the wheat's harvest.

The shehecheyanu is said at first occasions – many don't realize this includes every time we don a new piece of clothing. Try it once or twice – these blessings and others will be up on the Kehillah website with this talk – when you come back from the store with new purchases. Say the shehecheyanu before putting on a pair of new shoes, or other new clothing. The blessing transforms the moment from the habitual act of acquisition to one of gratitude for the plenty of our lives. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes in his study on prayer and symbolism: "How good it is to wrap oneself in prayer, spinning a deep softness of gratitude to God around all thoughts, enveloping oneself in the silken veil of song!"

While prayer can lead to the external focus of gratitude, it also serves to put the self at the center. In Hebrew the verb to pray is *l'hitpalel*. This verbal construct is reflexive, and can also be translated to mean "to judge oneself." In prayer we have the daily opportunity to turn inward and to both reveal and transform who we are.

One of the most spiritual places I have ever known was a public bench on a street corner on the edge of downtown Charlotte, North Carolina. Before I knew the traditional language of prayer I would go to there during my lunch break, eat my lunch and then sit in stillness and briefly release myself from the hectic demands of the day. I would focus, trying to recall the ultimate goals of my work, and remind myself of the core principles that I wanted to realize as I did my job. I would assess how I was doing so far that day.

Now, as I've adopted the traditional language of prayer into my spiritual practice, I've noticed that the words on the page are a daily reminder of the values I wish to hold – compassion, insight, gratitude, being a healing presence, using words carefully, working toward peace in ourselves, between others and within the world. Certainly there is a gap between the reality of my life and the words I say. That is precisely the point. The act of prayer put our ideals unflinchingly before us and reminds us of the vision and goals that we strive toward. They help us to look critically at ourselves and our actions, and they have the power to change what we do. I've noticed that after I pray for the healing individuals who are ill, I'm more likely to pick up the phone to see how they are doing. We pray not to change God, but to change ourselves.

Up until now, I've spoken mostly about individual prayer. How prayerful moments in a day can move us beyond the self while also leading to critical reflection on the self. Private prayer in our daily life, though, is ultimately sustained and reinvigorated by prayer with others. In an instant, communal prayer gives us memory, history, a future, and a connection to both community and divinity. We share a common language, and name ourselves as descendants of Abraham and Sarah binding us together regardless of our differences. Through prayer we utter words that connect us back thousands of years and to generations yet to be. Needing a minyan to pray, we recognize that we need each other, that each of us counts and is integral to

the whole. However we individually experience God, in community we are bound together in our reaching inwardly or outwardly to the Source of All.

So, through prayer we are linked to the world around us, to our ideals, to our community, and to divinity. We do not believe that, if only we had prayed frequently enough or passionately enough, our words would have stopped the hurricanes, earthquakes or fires that have claimed so many precious lives in the past weeks. Yet praying can help us to lead lives of awareness and connection, and to reach out with compassion to others. Tefillah, no less than teshuvah and tzedakah, can transform the meaning and quality of our lives. Together, as Unetannah Tokef wisely tells us, they can indeed transform the harshness of the decree.

On this Yom Kippur, may we find ways to reach out, to turn and return to our highest selves, and to bring the spiritual discipline of prayer into our lives. For us, may teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah be pathways to gratitude, deep satisfaction, inspired action, and increasing joy. Through living our lives well, with meaning and integrity, may we inscribe ourselves in the book of life. G'mar tov.